

VZCZCXRO6744
PP RUEHMA RUEHPA RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNK #0057 0251005
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 251005Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9042
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS NOUAKCHOTT 000057

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: MAURITANIAN IMAMS ISSUE FATWA AGAINST FEMALE
GENITAL MUTILATION

¶1. (U) On January 12, thirty-four of Mauritania's highest religious figures issued a fatwa prohibiting Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). After an in-depth study of FGM practices in Mauritanian society, a discussion of their medical impact and a religious debate; religious authorities decided that FGM poses a threat to women's health and well-being and is not a religious obligation. The fatwa states that FGM "has been declared dangerous by experts at the moment of performing the cutting and afterwards. This practice is forbidden given the dangers it entails." The authors based their decision that FGM is not mandated by Islam on the works of Shari'a expert Ibn al-Hajj, which state "female circumcision was not present in the Maghreb through centuries."

¶2. (U) PolOff met January 21 with Secretary General of the Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue Among Cultures Dr. Cheikh Ould Zeine Limame. Limame explained that the January 11-12 symposium leading to the fatwa was the last of three symposiums organized by the Forum of Islamic Thought and funded by German development agency GTZ. The previous two events were held in 2007 and 2008. The fatwa, he explains, reinforces provisions of the December 2005 Child Protection Law ordering prosecution of those who "damage the genital organs of a girl." According to Limame, the law has been ineffective because many believe FGM is a religious obligation. The fatwa prevents people from hiding behind the religious mask. "Those who perform FGM should know that they will be prosecuted," he said. Limame explained that the imams and the government alike view FGM as a public health problem. This practice is still common in the Brakna, Gorgol, Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui regions, particularly among the Soninke but it is present in all ethnic groups, including the Moors. When asked why no women participated in the symposium, he stated that the event gathered only religious leaders and Islamic law experts and that there are currently no women among them.

¶3. (U) Imam Hamden Ould Tah, one of Mauritania's highest religious authorities and President of the Oulema Association, told PolOff on January 21 that for the fatwa and law to be effective, the government and religious authorities need to conduct national awareness campaigns. "The fatwa is a centralized order that now needs to trickle down to other Imams and to the population," he stated. "We are looking into organizing a series of regional education seminars to inform imams and the public about the law, the fatwa and to raise awareness about other issues such as forced feeding and violence against women. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Female Promotion and Justice should be associated, he explained. Comment: On January 23, the Forum of Islamic Thought and Imam Tah submitted a project to the Embassy requesting funding for this regional awareness campaign. End comment.

¶4. (U) Charge commended Mauritania for the fatwa against FGM in a January 24 meeting with the Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Ould Neini (himself an imam seen as a leader of moderation). The Minister's Secretary General quickly noted

that the Minister had been a driving force in getting the religious leadership to take on the issue.

¶5. (U) Comment: In Mauritania, the backing of religious leaders carries significant weight among the population. National NGOs working on FGM have been trying to get the Islamic hierarchy to come out against FGM for years. Gathering the support of provincial imams and conducting effective education and public health campaigns at the regional level could potentially help eradicate the practice of FGM. Effective law enforcement would also be necessary to ensure the law is applied and those who break it are held accountable. End comment.

HANKINS